

The Practical Value of Old Testament Exegesis¹

Ellen F. Davis

Amos Ragan Kearns Professor of Bible and Practical Theology
Duke University Divinity School
edavis@duke.div.edu

Practical exegesis means reading the biblical story for the good of both church and society. Two practices of reading Scripture are explored here: 1. African and North American Christians reading together as a learning community, in order to ask more adequate questions of the text and thus develop a richer understanding of truth; and 2. biblical interpretation as political ethics, with particular attention to how the Bible focuses on the daily economic lives of ordinary people, “the poor and vulnerable.”

Early in my years as a teacher, one of my Master of Divinity students was making prefatory comments before I spoke to a group of incoming students. This is how he explained what I contributed to the intellectual life of that Divinity School: “She teaches us . . . [long pause] . . . well, she teaches us how to read.” I doubt that statement impressed or edified anyone but me, but I still accept it as the best one-sentence description of what I try to do in classroom and in print: to read Israel’s Scriptures with an ever-deepening comprehension and appreciation, and help others to do the same. It seems to me that reading and exegesis of primary texts is the foundation of all scholarly work, at least in the humanities, and I hope that my teaching and writing encourages—I don’t mind if it *forces*—my students and readers to become better, slower, more patient readers of the Bible. Of course, my students are required to read some scholarly literature about the Bible, but I design my assignments to ensure that their primary reading is the Bible itself.

Becoming better, slower, more patient readers is a practical aspiration, and this brings me to the gist of what I want to say: Reading and exegeting texts is the most important and the most practical intellectual work that scholars and pastors do. Further, it is equally practical for those in academic posts and those engaged in pastoral ministry. Although my academic title—“professor of Bible and practical theology”—is unwieldy, I like it, because it keeps my eye on the ball. In my judgment,

¹ This article is adapted from a plenary address presented originally for the *Stone-Campbell Journal* Conference, April 7-8, 2017, at Johnson University, Knoxville, Tennessee.

the ball for a biblical scholar who teaches in a Divinity School is doing exegesis with a view to the “so-what question.” This, then, is the question I must ask on a daily basis: If I choose this topic for a lecture, a sermon, a course, or give this assignment, or undertake to write this book—will it make any practical difference over the long run to people who have urgent responsibilities and should have urgent things on their mind? If what I say and write does not in some way help people to think about the most serious matters of human existence in the presence of God, then there are surely better ways for me to spend my time and theirs.

This short essay has two parts, the first somewhat more theoretical. I begin by talking about reading the Bible as a practice of the virtue of magnanimity, intellectual or imaginative generosity. Then I consider specific ways in which practical exegesis may be of value at this time in our common life, in both church and society.

THE BIBLE AND GENEROSITY

Stanley Hauerwas has made the exegetically fruitful suggestion that it is through reading narratives that we develop a generous imagination: “To read is to be pulled out of myself to imagine a different life.”² Think of the imaginative generosity of children, who are eager to be pulled out of the original sin of self-absorption through the unconsciously generous act of listening to a story—even and especially a story they have heard over and over again. Reading or listening to narratives is an act of magnanimity because it entails accepting a coherence that comes to us from outside ourselves. Following a complex story through, and especially an ancient story, requires that we accept as provisionally true a certain understanding of humanity and the world that we did not invent to suit our present convenience and cannot validate purely on the basis of our own experience.

If taken seriously enough, the willingness to listen to narratives and accept them as true readings of the world is a religious act, an act of *obedience*. The Latin root *ob-odire* [*audire*], translated over-literally perhaps, implies “listening toward” someone; the image seems to be leaning forward to listen intently. Similarly, the Hebrew verb *shama*⁶ means “hear” in the simple sense, and also “listen,” and further, “obey.” Christians, Jews, and Muslims, at our best, model what it is to live in accordance with certain narrative orderings of reality—represented in Bible, Mishnah and Talmud, Qur’an and Hadith—narratives that countless generations in our several traditions have judged to give us access to as much “truth” as we can take in.³

² Stanley Hauerwas, “Generosity, a letter written on the thirteenth anniversary of the baptism of Laurence Bailey Wells,” in *The Character of Virtue: Letters to a Godson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

³ I am using the word “narrative” in the broad sense, although much of the arc of the biblical story and of these other texts is executed in non-narrative genres such as prophetic poetry, epigrams, case law and precept, as well as apostolic letters.

As peoples who claim allegiance to a scriptural tradition, we Muslims, Jews, and Christians implicitly agree to live interpretive lives, to live by our readings of those core texts. The attempt to live thus is highly countercultural, and it is not easy to explain why so many millions are willing even to try. As a teacher and preacher, I always view it as a kind of miracle that one can explicate an ancient text from the pulpit or lectern, or discuss it in a circle around a table, and people, often to their own surprise, hear that text as having some direct bearing on their lives. That is, they receive this text as their own, as Scripture. Such a response to an old story may not be irrational, but it is certainly not a product of the Enlightenment model of education that has formed us all as functional Westerners and professionals. Yet the willingness to be “taken in,” claimed by these texts, is potentially one of the best things about us. It marks us “peoples of the book” as believing that there is such a thing as truth, and not just infinitely fungible facts, and further, as believing that we ourselves will be held responsible for what we accept as truth.

Now I turn to two specific areas in which patient, “obedient” attention to the biblical story may be of practical value for us and our communities. I focus first on what I have learned over two decades from reading Scripture with African Christians, and second, on doing exegesis with an awareness that is simultaneously theological and political.

My own practical education as a biblical theologian began in earnest in 1996. That year I had as students two Anglican bishops, of Sudan and Zaire/Congo; they went on to become Archbishops of South Sudan and Rwanda, respectively. The urgency of their work as bishops in war-torn countries, and their interest in the OT as foundational for that work, lent greater urgency to my own work. In a word, it moved me to put the “so-what question” front-and-center in my lectures that year. That has proven to be a permanent point of orientation for me as both teacher and scholar, an orientation that has been renewed through regular opportunities to work with East African colleagues and students. Most years since 2004 I have spent a week or more teaching in South Sudan or Uganda—in the last two years, in the company of about a dozen of my Duke students. I hasten to add that “teaching” in that context means that I listen—to the text and the other interpreters in the room—much more than I lecture. Indeed, we all work hard to hear the text in ways none of us could have heard it apart from the others present. The *modus operandi* of our intercontinental Bible study differs from accustomed modes of study on both continents. “Revolutionary” is an adjective I often hear from students, both African and American, about this kind of learning experience. We are not trying to take in a set of historical or literary facts or to frame a set of “right answers” to the teacher’s questions. Rather, we are listening together in order to ask more adequate questions of the text and thus develop a more capacious sense of truth.

Here is a recent example of how we learn together, taken from January of this year. After a semester of study in African biblical hermeneutics, my class traveled to

Kampala, Uganda, as guest-participants in a week-long conference of church and civic leaders working toward reconciliation in the war-torn nations of the African Great Lakes region: Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Burundi, Rwanda, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴ There the dozen of us were joined in seminar by an equal number of East African Christians. Together we read Jeremiah, Nahum, and Jonah, three biblical books set against the background of ravaging wars in Israel and Judah in the eighth to sixth centuries BCE.

Half the participants in our seminar had endured devastating wars in their own land, as did the biblical prophets themselves. Equipped with that kind of practical expertise, the African participants often saw meaning in textual details that North Americans like me had overlooked. Why, for instance, does Jeremiah focus on roads—roads being built, roads being traveled upon—as a major sign of the restoration of social order, as he looks ahead to the period after destruction and exile? I had read right past it, since I take the existence of safe, passable roads as a given; but Bishop Hilary of Malakal in South Sudan does not. Again, readers from rural villages had no difficulty at all understanding why the book of Jeremiah includes a very lengthy, detailed description of the prophet making legal purchase of a field in his village, a field where the occupying force from Babylon was currently encamped, but where he believed his family would someday plant crops. Yet again, it was eye-opening to read the vengeful little book of Nahum with Jean-Claude, a peace-worker from Burundi. I might see nothing edifying in Nahum's fierce anticipation of divine judgment on the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, the great destroyer of nations. However, Jean-Claude saw the angry prophet as someone who shared his own vocation to name God's judgment on those wreaking havoc with his homeland. Once again, when we read Jonah, the East Africans found that disgruntled prophet to be a more sympathetic character than I did. They felt at an existential level Jonah's fear of being marked as a traitor, if he preached repentance to the people of Nineveh, and thus brought salvation to the great destroyer of Israel and Judah. In sum, because the African seminar members know only too well the realities of war on their own soil, they discovered more social complexity, more dramatic tension, and altogether more truth in these prophetic texts that stand against the background of war trauma than did I and the other North American interpreters.

After our week of shared study, my Duke students wrote about their perceptions of biblical interpretation in that context. Katie Murchison Ross comments that the African participants in our seminar are people who have risked their health, their lives and the well-being of their families for the sake of the gospel, sometimes

⁴ The conference referenced here was the Great Lakes Initiative Leadership Institute, sponsored jointly by the Mennonite Central Committee, World Vision International, African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM), and Duke Divinity School's Center for Reconciliation, and held at Ggaba National Seminary in Kampala, Uganda.

losing (for a time, at least) their only safety-net, namely the respect and support of their families and communities of origin. “So I think,” she says,

. . . biblical interpretation is not at all a detached academic exercise or even what some call a purely spiritual endeavor. Rather, the Bible is bread and butter, shield and trauma counselor, inspiration and confrontation. It is a language and a practice for each day. So it should come as no surprise that so many of the interpretations we’ve heard are highly contextual and highly practical. There is no luxury of detachment.⁵

Duke student Mark McHugh observes that the African participants in the conference on reconciliation do not view theology as a set of ideas, but rather as “a summons into a total way of being in the world.” Further, the Bible itself is not viewed as an inert object, on which we might perform the operation that seminary students learn to call “exegesis,” which always sounds like a slightly unnatural act. Rather, the Bible is an active subject with which we engage in “a dynamic two-way conversation.”⁶ Exegesis is therefore a work of inter-subjectivity, and not only between text and a single reader, but a multisided kind of engagement among members of an interpretive community gathered around a text. Those familiar with the dynamics of traditional Jewish Talmud-Torah study would see an extended-family resemblance. The ideal interpreter is not a lone star, a brilliant individual who has a point to make *about* the text—and if one is lucky, a point that has not yet been published. Rather, the best source of valid interpretations is a community that finds *in* the text a reflection of its life, or to change the metaphor, a map for its life.

It is commonly asserted by Westerners that most Africans read the Bible uncritically. Certainly it is true that historical critical methods have made much less impact upon readers on the Continent. Yet what I have consistently observed is that Africans are often more critical readers than North Americans, if critical reading involves sensitivity to the social context from which a given text comes. They have more critical capacity because many or most East Africans, like most Israelites, are familiar with the basic dynamics of agrarian kinship-based societies, and further, as I have suggested, they have direct experience of both violent conflict and of cultural domination by more powerful nations. These experiences are tools for sharp, insightful readings, provided African readers are encouraged to draw on knowledge derived from their own complex contexts and communities of reading for the purposes of exegesis.⁷ That kind

⁵ Katie Murchison Ross, unpublished paper, written February 2017.

⁶ Mark McHugh, unpublished paper, written February 2017.

⁷ On the importance of current social context in African readings of Scripture, see Gerald West, “The Vocation of an African Biblical Scholar on the Margins of Biblical Scholarship,” *OTE* 19.1 (2006) 307-336; on a “tri-polar model” of interpretation, see Rose Nyirimana-Mukansengimana and Jonathan A. Draper, “The Role of Women in Creating Safe Space for ‘Strangers’: Reading of Joshua 2:1-21 and John 18:15-17 from the Context of Rwandan Conflict,” *JISA* 152 (2015) 96-113.

of awareness is what their North American counterparts often lack. One of the Duke students in our seminar on the biblical prophets asked: How can we North Americans cultivate a fuller awareness of our own contexts—national, local—and thus perhaps hear these texts of trauma with a higher degree of acuity?

In order to address that question, I return to the central matter of the value of OT exegesis. Through the whole week of shared study, most biblical texts cited—not just in our seminar but also in sermons, lectures, and personal testimony—were from the OT. The Duke students recognized that their African colleagues did not seem to have the problem that so many people in our churches and even in seminaries have, of not knowing what to do with very much of the OT, of finding it boring, offensive, irrelevant. We tend to think the problem is in the text, of course. However, my student’s question prompts me to ask: Is our frequent inability to “get into” the OT, despite massive amounts of scholarly treatment, due in part to the fact that we are insensitive to those contexts in our own cultures where people might find their own experience reflected in ancient texts written against the background of acute social trauma? Reciprocally, could a commitment to reading a wider range of biblical texts enable us to see experiences of corporate trauma and acute social disruption in our own extended communities, if not in our own neighborhoods?

THE BIBLE AND POLITICAL ETHICS

Now for the final part of this essay I turn to a second area where the practical value of OT exegesis is evidenced, namely in political ethics. I was recently asked to speak at my own church on the question of preaching and political responsibility. Perhaps such invitations have become more common for many pastors and teachers in recent months, as we deal with “political questions” that in the past might not have come to our attention. The following observations represent my very preliminary thinking in this matter:

1) **Good biblical interpretation necessarily has a political dimension, because the Bible consistently deals with matters that are simultaneously both theological and political.** When I say that the Bible is consistently political, I do not mean that it is narrowly issue-oriented or time-bound in its concerns. Rather, it is political in its steady focus on *setting the parameters for moral life in community*, on identifying just limits for the exercise of human power at every level. The Bible considers that the most important thing about any of us as people of faith concerns our behaviors and activities as members of a community, be it the household or the village or the nation or the post-national community of colonized Judeans or Jews. This is another major reason why African Christians gravitate toward the OT, because virtually all their important actions and decisions are taken in the context of some kind of body politic, from the extended family on up. This fundamentally communal and political dimension of the Scriptures is impossible to

miss with the OT, and it is present also in the NT—although North American readers, with our strong individualistic bias, often miss it. That brings me to my second and closely related observation.

2) **The attempt to be an apolitical Christian, for those who think that is what true faith requires, leads to a thin or distorted faith.** The single best correction to that distortion may well be the OT, which confronts us with the thickness of political existence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from Tegel prison, notes (maybe with some surprise) that he finds himself reading the OT more and more. He uses a metaphor to explain why this seems necessary to him: because the OT puts “the church in the center of the village,” in the places where human responsibility must be exercised by each of us on a daily basis—“and in this sense,” he says, “we still read the New Testament far too little on the basis of the Old The Old Testament speaks of *historical* redemption”;⁸ it does not let us write off the world prematurely.

3) **The OT takes politics seriously without idealizing the political realm.** This may be the most important thing to be said about “biblical politics”: it entails no romanticizing, no idealizing of leadership. The best is flawed (Moses, David), and the worst is blasphemous, idolatrous, and murderous. If you look at the history of the judges and kings you see that there is a great deal of the worst. The prophet Hosea does not speak idly when he says, “I give you [Israel] king[s] in my anger and take [them] away in my wrath” (13:11). From a biblical perspective, the political situation is almost always grave, but not yet hopeless. God does not give up on raising up faithful leadership. As an individual, David the king is seriously flawed first to last, and yet the Prophets show that God never quite gives up on the royal house of David—or as Amos (9:11) puts it, on the “booth” of David, a *sukkah*, which is, notably, a flimsy and temporary structure.

4) **Using the Bible responsibly in addressing current political situations requires some knowledge of ancient “facts on the ground.”** Somehow those basic facts need to be made clear and interesting to a contemporary audience. In the classroom, I like to keep a map before my students, a changing map of the several empires that dominated Levant through almost all of the biblical period: Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Hellenistic, Roman. American travelers sometimes speak, however ignorantly, of “fly-over states” in the central United States. Similarly, from an imperial perspective, Israel and Judah were essential “march-through states”; armies and caravans had to pass along the coastal road connecting Asia and Africa. International borders were redrawn multiple times through the centuries, yet as the maps show, what remains constant is the comparative size of Israel and Judah: a dot the size of an ink blot on the scroll of empire. If we remem-

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, letters to Eberhard Bethge, dated April 30 and June 27, 1944, in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1953) 93, 112. Italics original.

ber that as we read, then questions such as these become pressing: What does it mean to hold sacred a text that comes from a people who were mostly on the losing side of history, the subjugated, the people we now call “subalterns,” under the thumb of the history-makers? Can we who belong to a society that is currently one of the history-makers—and to a privileged class within that society (the highly educated)—comprehend and genuinely appropriate their stories, their theological claims, their prayers, which are so often born of corporate suffering and anger?

5) **Taking the political perspective of the Bible seriously requires that we think more about economics in the ancient world.** The biblical writers lived in societies in which there was a tiny elite class, and then everybody else. The crucial economic arrangements with which the writers of both Testaments are most concerned are not royal trade streams, or wars and colonizing efforts aimed at securing resources—although these were often pressing realities. Nonetheless the biblical writers are most interested in the economics of daily life, for the ordinary villager or Jerusalemite. Very much of the OT gets interesting and urgent only if one attends to questions such as this: Who has access to land and claims its products for their own family? That is, who has secure access to food and water, and who does not? Who gets paid for their labor on the land, and thus has some limited control over their own life and that of their children, and who is enslaved, either permanently or to work off a debt? These are practical questions that North American interpreters often forget to ask when reading the Bible, probably because we are not sensitive to issues such as hunger, land control, and slave labor in our own contexts. Hunger and slavery are of course not absent from our communities, even if slavery is no longer state-sponsored. However, because they are not highly visible to most professionals, the Bible’s concern for such matters may slip past us. The answers to these questions point to political-economic arrangements, then as now. Surely it is no coincidence that as soon as the Israelites have crossed the Red Sea out of Egypt, their first obligation as a political body in freedom is to abide by a divine mandated system for eating in community, so there is enough for everyone and not too much for anyone. That is the manna economy.

A starting exercise for gaining sensitivity to economic concerns in the Bible is to begin reading by *looking for the ordinary people*, the “poor and vulnerable,” as Prophets and Psalms often call them. Pay attention to the small-farmers in the OT, and in the NT to the fishermen who give much or most of their take to the government. Look for the women—the quintessential “ordinary people” in most parts of the Bible—who are directly responsible for putting food on the table. Listen to the texts with their desperate hopes in mind. So for instance, there is this line, repeated five times in a single psalm: “The vulnerable shall take legal possession of land” (Ps 37:11, also 9, 22, 29, 34). Matthew memorably renders that divine promise: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5, KJV). If that does not seem to us to be a clear echo of the psalmist, perhaps that is because

our standard translations have obscured the economic dimension that is so important in the Psalm. If we translate the Beatitude, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall *possess land*,” then we may come closer to Matthew’s intention.⁹

In sum, then, doing practical exegesis means reading for the good of the community, with a view to human need in this time and place, and that is necessarily a political act. **Scj**

⁹ See Ellen F. Davis, *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014) 217–230.



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